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The complexities of assessing ESF performance: some specific examples

During the 1990/91 academic year the ESF Assessment Unit asked us to coordinate the work of a group of European experts from institutions and countries with considerable experience in assessment work - CEREQ (France), IAB (Germany), ISFOL (Italy) and the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, the aim being to draw up a proposal concerning the methodology for a retrospective evaluation of programmes funded with ESF assistance (Planas and Garcia 1991). We subsequently did an informal follow-up of the evaluation work done in some countries and carried out our own evaluation of various ESF-assisted activities in Spain.

The points made in this article are based both on our own work of coordinating and synthesizing traditional European practice in this field, as also on our direct experience at various levels of evaluating ESF and other Community programmes.

The ESF Assessment Unit entrusted the author with coordinating a working group consisting of several experts from Member States in order to formulate a methodological proposal for ex-post assessment of programmes co-funded by the ESF. His work enables him to examine the main issues such an evaluation raises:

- the tension between the social logic and the economics behind training and employment policies,
- generating demand which is of necessity adapted to supply,
- difficulties in identifying groups,
- insufficiencies of data and indicators,
- the lag between assessment findings and planning new activities.

The proposal prepared for the ESF Assessment Unit contained the broad outlines for a methodology set out below (Planas and Garcia 1991).

The principal objective of the evaluation activity set in train with the reform of the Structural Funds was quite clearly to improve the effectiveness of Community structural operations. It was therefore considered of fundamental importance, among other measures, to strengthen and extend the traditional evaluation practice of the Member States, which consequently should be made an element of partnership so as to be able to count on the necessary cooperation.

It follows from this principal objective that the retrospective evaluation process should have a four-pronged approach:

- Assessing the effectiveness of operations in terms of their basic objectives.
- Determining effectiveness in terms of the aims of the operation (training, integrating into working life, facilitating return to work etc.).

- Ascertaining the impact of operations in terms of their effects - positive and negative, expected and unforeseen - on the target groups and the region concerned.

- Measuring the efficiency of operations.

Retrospective evaluation, therefore, has three aspects. The first is the analysis of effectiveness of operations in terms of the degree - full, satisfactory or less than satisfactory - to which the objectives initially set are attained. The second is the analysis of efficiency in the sense of optimum and rational use of resources allocated to the projects or programmes in order to achieve the stated aims, and the third the analysis of what has been achieved in terms of what may be called "equity". By this we mean the impact of the training programmes in creating equality of opportunity and either compensating for disadvantages or ensuring positive discrimination of the disadvantaged among job-seekers.

The working party's research enabled us to identify the following functions as ba-



sic to the retrospective evaluation process:

❑ Evaluation as a measurement process (quantity or quality). Every evaluation process involves measuring, but cannot be reduced to the mere measuring of a number of end results. In the first place the data obtained by measurement are not in themselves an evaluation. They need to be interpreted and this interpretation serves as the basis for evaluation. Secondly, not all the effects of an operation are quantifiable and a good evaluation needs to combine both quantitative aspects - which will subsequently have to be rated in terms of quality - and qualitative aspects.

❑ Evaluation as interpretation and as an instrument for decision-making. Evaluation is conceived as a process of creation and analysis of information contributing to more rational decisions.

❑ Evaluation as an internal training process. Evaluation is, or should be, a means of improving our knowledge of how the operation was conducted by those responsible and by the specialist professionals involved.

❑ Evaluation as an area for concertation. Evaluation is also, or should be, the basis for an interchange between the parties concerned, particularly with the social partners. Evaluation is not simply a gathering of results of limited usefulness but a means of involving the various parties.

These criteria can also be expressed negatively as what evaluation should not be. Thus

❑ Evaluation should not be reduced to the mere quantifying of operations and their apparently objective results.

❑ Evaluation should not be linked to administrative control and inspection procedures. It is, therefore, important to distinguish clearly between the objectives and methods of auditors and those used in retrospective evaluation.

❑ Evaluation should not be confined to an inventory of what has been achieved but should also analyse the processes with a view to using the findings in future decision-making. Evaluation always involves feedback.

❑ Evaluation should not become a form of self-reproach, stressing only the limitations of operations and the failures; it should mainly record the positive achievements, whether direct or indirect.

The ESF's evaluation policy is still in the process of development and no "traditional practice" has yet become established. The following comments, therefore, make no claim to weigh up the pros and cons of the evaluation process - for which in any case we have no specific data - but are simply a statement of what in our view are the formal and substantive difficulties involved in any attempt to evaluate ESF operations.

Evaluating ESF projects and programmes is an extremely complex undertaking because of their political implications, their scope and the diversity of the regions in which they are carried out.

As the evaluation activity encouraged by the administrative departments of the ESF becomes more generalised, questions and problems arise, of which we will here only mention those which seem to us most relevant. There are six points to be made: the contradiction between economic and social policies, the fact that demand necessarily focuses on what is available, an over-simplistic approach to the relationship between training and employment, the difficulty involved in identifying target groups, the lack of statistical data and indicators and, finally, the fact that the results of evaluation are not available early enough for use in planning new operations.

1. A social or an economic problem? Social assistance or productivity?

The first problem involved in evaluating operations given ESF assistance - which we shall henceforth refer to simply as "ESF programmes" - concerns the basic objectives. Like many aspects of domestic policy, ESF programmes have two underlying rationales or aims - the social aim of helping the disadvantaged and the economic one of assuring the availability of substantial human resources of high quality and of increasing competitiveness.

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In fact, the coexistence of these two rationales merely reflects a contradiction inherent in evolving education policy and the development of training systems to which attention has already been drawn by a number of authors and which has been clearly stated by M. Carnoy and H. Levin (1985). According to this analysis, the welfare state and the economic structure of developed countries give rise to a clash between the will to democratise and the desire for equality and compensation for disadvantages on the one hand and the need to design and promote ways and means of encouraging competition, profitability and productivity on the other.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that opting for a programme focusing exclusively on output and profitability does not necessarily mean that the objective will be attained since, as J. Delors has stressed, the tensions that have been revealed by the employment crisis show that maintaining social cohesion - and consequently the struggle against exclusion - is a prerequisite for productivity and competitiveness.

At the same time, it is clear that these contradictions do not only exist at a macro-social level but that they also are replicated in everyday practice and inevitably produce certain perverse effects. The most obvious of these in the case of external programme evaluation relates to the criteria for effectiveness. Thus to give priority to an indicator such as the employment rate as a measure of the success of training activity may have the perverse result that when selecting people for training courses, the training bodies end up giving preference to those most easily employable, to the detriment to those who have greater difficulty finding a job.

2. Solutions in search of problems?

The effort to define common objectives and initiatives for the European countries in general involves the risk that the responses emanating from the governments of Member States and from within the countries themselves will be adapted to the central proposals, and that managers

will be more concerned with meeting the requirements for programme approval than with formulating specific needs.

This relationship between proposal and response, which in this case concerns on the one hand the objectives and the initiatives of the ESF and on the other the Operational Programmes proposed by the various countries, has been referred to as “Solutions in search of problems” (Kingdon 1984).

This relationship increases the risk of diminishing the basic impetus and encouraging bureaucratic responses reflecting a desire to adapt to the various possibilities envisaged rather than creativity and initiative. This means that the Member States from government level downwards may tend to respond by asking for what the Fund is ready to offer, submitting proposals notable for their conformity to “what is available” having regard to Community objectives and initiatives, rather than working out, on the basis of the needs in the regions concerned, responses which have more bearing on problems that are shared in essence but which differ considerably in terms of form, degree and content from one country to another.

Clearly the clarity and specific nature of objectives is a prime condition for assessing the results obtained, and where such “conformist” replies are given the failure adequately to define the objectives will impede the smooth running of the programme and its subsequent evaluation.

This in turn brings with it two threats to the quality of the evaluation process - namely the difficulty of establishing criteria and assessing results of programmes when the objectives and the reference groups are standardised, so that certain realities are ignored, and the generating of tautological information which only discloses what has been known from the outset.

3. Relationship between training and employment

Generally speaking, ESF programmes are based on training, which means that when



seeking to assess their impact we are faced with the problems caused by the relationship of training to employment, which has been described as "introuvable" (Tanguy 1986). Despite the complexity of the relationship between training and employment there is all too often a tendency to simplify by assuming a direct correlation between the training activity carried out and the subsequent job situation of those attending the training courses.

The current state of research into the relationship between training and employment (Planas 1993) directs us towards broader and more complex interpretation models that take account of aspects such as the encouraging of attitudes and expectations in trainees, the relationship between training and previous education, the relationship between training and other important characteristics of the trainees, unexpected uses made of training facilities, etc.

While one cannot expect the evaluation of ESF programmes to provide answers to the multitude of theoretical and practical questions raised by this relationship, it should be possible to avoid simplifications that inhibit the understanding and assessment of the programmes' real impact. It will probably be necessary to revise a number of assumptions underlying training policy that dwell excessively on the theoretical direct link between training and employment.

The complexity of the relationship between training and employment calls, for example, for considerable caution in deciding on the causes of the situation of trainees following the ESF programme without allowing for other factors, since too much optimism as to the effect of training on chances of finding a job may lead to a disappointing evaluation. Moreover, we have to realise that the provision of training may produce effects not directly reflected in terms of occupation but relevant in terms of professionalism.

The generalised response of offering training as a means of solving employment problems also brings with it two risks - that of making the unemployed responsible for their joblessness "because they are not sufficiently qualified" and that of using training indiscriminately because there

is no other type of response available and out of the false conviction that training cannot do any harm, even though its immediate relevance is not clear.

One of the essential tasks of retrospective evaluation of vocational training is to measure and interpret the effectiveness of the training system in helping the unemployed to find jobs or, where appropriate, of improvements in job qualifications through worker training.

Generally speaking, evaluation has tended to be excessively technocratic and linear, looking at the rate of job placement of unemployed trainees (the percentage of jobs obtained within a certain time after completion of the training course). Although this figure is of interest and relevant, it masks realities of which the evaluation should take account. Basically there are three aspects to be considered here:

(a) The link between rates of job placement and retraining and the economic situation of the country concerned (expansion, stagnation or recession), as also the ordering and regulation of the labour market and policies for promoting employment (job insecurity, employment incentives etc). The achieving of objectives (in terms of effectiveness of training activity) is influenced by the economic and employment situation in the region concerned and success or failure of a programme must be viewed in this context.

(b) The number of people obtaining jobs does not accurately reflect the link between training and the success of job placement in terms either of causality or of the correspondence between the type of training received and the type of job obtained.

(c) Moving on from the subject of causality, training implies the imparting of skills, knowledge and attitudes which may prove decisive in obtaining a job, even though there is no clear link between the training received and the job obtained. Such "indirect causality" is unclear and difficult to allow for in the evaluation.

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4. Defining target groups in connection with ESF objectives

Objectives 3 and 4 of the Structural Funds as they were up to 1993 summarise the main aims and the target groups for training activity - the long-term unemployed and young people.

However, these two groups create real problems in practice. The requirement that a person be registered as unemployed for a certain time and for age limits to define groups of long-term unemployed and young people is, if nothing else, out of line with the current structure of the labour market and the occupational transition of young people from the educational system to the world of work.

There is a considerable volume of literature, starting with youth sociology, which revises and ultimately rules out the use of age groups as an indicator for the transition of young people to adult life (CEDEFOP 1994, Ganant and Cavalli 1993). Recent studies of job placement models for young people relate more to the route taken rather than to age. Far more important at the level of government youth employment policy is to bear in mind the various forms of transition to the world of work rather than narrowing or extending the range of ages at will as a function of a transition that is assumed to take longer and longer.

On the other hand, recent studies show that the group of long-term unemployed benefiting most from training activities assisted by the funds tend to be concentrated on the under-35s, with considerable emphasis on women with family responsibilities who are seeking to return to work (Casal, Garcia, Merino 1994). Moreover, applying the criteria of a certain number of months of registered unemployment is not satisfactory as a means of identifying the long-term unemployed in the strict sense of the term. It is obvious that while a person is receiving unemployment benefit the pressure to find a job is less, or non-existent in many cases, and that there may be a very close link between the time during which benefit is paid and long-term unemployment.

The revised ESF objectives 3 and 4 involve an important change which seeks to correct some of these shortcomings. Objective 3 now refers to those who are unemployed, seeking their first job or at risk of losing their job. Objective 4 refers to workers in employment who need re-training in order to increase competitiveness and adapt to change. This new proposal will have its advantages, despite persistent shortcomings, the two most important of these being in our view the definition of target groups in terms of the labour market and the levels of training activities.

It would, for example, probably be more useful to refer to possible situations or basic routes for occupational development than to identify all the groups as such in statistical terms - young people, workers, the long-term unemployed etc. It may be that after years of experience and effort to identify and define the groups at which government policy is to be targeted so radical a proposal for change may be surprising. Clearly we do not have the space here to justify the new approach but would refer to recent sociological research into the transition to working life which shows that consideration of the various stages of the transitional routes is more important than the social profiles of those concerned.

We would refer to the four main transitional situations (CEDEFOP, 1994; Casal, Garcia, Merino, 1994).

(a) Exclusion from transition to the world of work: this is a standstill situation affecting those people who in practical terms have been excluded from the primary labour market. There is no overlap here with the “long-term unemployed” since it refers to the difficulties of the persistently unemployed (predominance of periods of unemployment over their working life) and the secondary market.

(b) Transition from unemployment to employment: this includes people starting or resuming work after a period of inactivity. It includes young people seeking to make the transition from the educational system to working life, housewives seeking to return to work or migrants seeking work. What all these groups have in common is the need to



improve their job qualifications and to discover the best way to find a job (vocational guidance).

(c) Job rotation: this refers to people in work or unemployed in a circulating or rotating labour market. It includes young people with apprenticeship contracts, casual workers, those on contracts for specific jobs, temporary employees, etc. It also includes those employed in the secondary market. The element common to these various groups is the precariousness of their employment - finding a job and losing it, drawing unemployment benefit, taking another type of job etc.

(d) Stable employment. This term covers those members of the working population who are in stable employment with a contract of employment for an indefinite period or those who are self-employed. It therefore refers to a situation of permanence and job stability. Obviously this includes those adult workers employed in firms which may have to run down their workforce, who could therefore find themselves made redundant.

When drawing up and evaluating training and employment policies account must also be taken of the level of training of persons in the situations we have defined.

The target groups for training activities are thus defined by the fact that they are all in one of the situations described and have similar training levels.

5. Quality of Community and national statistical information

The quality of planning and assessment activity depends partly on the quality of statistical information sources in a particular area and relating to a certain population group or to specific activities.

As we pointed out in our technical proposal (Planas, Garcia 1991) a good evaluation policy should, if it is to have a certain continuity, make full use of available statistical information and if necessary improve the existing means for providing such information or create new ones.

Some of the problems we have referred to arise because of the shortcomings of statistical information systems. The varying rates of development of such systems from one Member State to another and the nature of the data available make it difficult in many cases to identify the situations defined above and provide elements of reference for programme evaluation and planning (CEDEFOP 1993, Planas, Garcia 1991).

There are at least three different problems relating to statistical information systems whose solution would considerably improve ability to effectively evaluate the activities of the ESF. They are:

- (a) The relevance of variables and their ability to define and demarcate.
- (b) The need for a historical picture to permit the analysis of development rather than of static situations.
- (c) The need for data specific to the region in which a programme is to take place.

The systems should be able to record changes and trends and the particular features of reference groups in the various Member States. In the case of the Community they should assist the mechanisms for pinpointing international correlations. This would mean establishing close links between the statistical information systems in the various Member States and Eurostat and the evaluation activities of the Structural Funds.

6. Feedback of results of retrospective evaluation

A final area of problems and difficulties, and not the least important, is the time taken to carry out evaluation on completion of a programme. Experience of evaluating the impact of training activities on target groups (job placement and retraining) has demonstrated the need for historical sequences of between three months and a year in order to analyse how training has produced significant changes in the careers of individuals (Planas, Garcia 1991).

However, the time elapsing between the start of a programme and its completion

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plus the additional time necessary for evaluation and the time needed for searching out information and analysing results means that the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation process cannot be fed back for planning the following programme because, for obvious reasons, this is put into effect before the previous one is completed.

Retrospective evaluation takes time and cannot contribute to the next two programmes. Moreover, since the evaluation of training activities is carried out in the light of the economic and labour market situations - which may be expanding or in recession - the resulting recommendations are also likely to be considerably influenced.

Finally, we would point out that the important role played by the Structural Funds

in the maintenance of social cohesion and economic development within the European Union demands that particular attention be paid to assessing the effectiveness of Community structural operations.

Evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of such operations is, moreover, a fundamental element in the dialogue between the social partners and between them and the Commission.

For all these reasons we are of the opinion that the problems and risks we have discussed deserve particular attention by the Commission and other Community institutions at the level of policy-making and budget appropriations with a view to creating evaluation and information systems that are meaningful, transparent and comparable as regards the impact of EU structural activity.

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